



Another possible gov't shutdown looms

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BOISE — The federal government is once again days from a shutdown due to deadlock in Congress and a budget process that hasn't been completed according to normal procedure in years. It's part of what has become a cycle of regular crisis in the U.S. House and Senate, a cycle that a former Idaho National Lab director says is destructive.

The last near-miss for a federal government shutdown came only a month ago, when Congress passed a stopgap measure to keep the government open. That stopgap expires Friday.

The problem isn't a lack of money in federal coffers, but a lack of Congressional authorization to distribute it. Shutdowns don't happen when the government runs out of cash, but when Congress allows the last budget (or omnibus spending bill or continuing resolution) to expire without passing another to replace it.

Short-term government shutdowns aren't always highly disruptive. Shutdowns were a regular occurrence during the Reagan administration, but [they generally lasted a day or two](#). Because federal agencies still had some spending authority left, shutdowns came and went with little impact.

But in recent years, impending, barely averted shutdowns have become almost the norm, and the last two actual shutdowns — both triggered by partisan fights over entitlement programs — have been long and had major impacts on the economy. Both a shutdown in the mid-1990s and the 2013 shutdown resulted in hundreds of thousands of federal workers being furloughed without pay, suspension of non-essential government functions and other problems.

John Grossenbacher was the director of Idaho National Laboratory during the 2013 shutdown.

"We were within 24 hours of furloughing a lot of lab employees because of a government shutdown," he said. "Government shutdowns are extraordinarily disruptive, and they make running an institution like the lab more difficult. It's a terrible way to do business."

Grossenbacher said the shutdown, and the atmosphere of constant budget crisis has reigned on Capitol Hill since then, amount to "gross mismanagement" of the federal government.

"It wastes taxpayer dollars. It disrupts the flow of work. It creates planning and execution challenges that are totally inappropriate. You shouldn't ever be thinking: 'What are we going to do when we can't afford to pay the security force anymore?'" Grossenbacher said.

The shutdown affected more than the lab, hitting agencies such as the Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management and National Park Service as well. According to [a report by the Congressional Research Service](#), national parks lost out on \$7 million in entrance fees during the 2013 shutdown. The Office of Management and Budget estimated that shutting down services that monitor compliance with taxes cost \$1 billion per week, and it also estimated the total loss to the broader economy was about \$6 billion.

Rep. Mike Simpson has consistently called for a return to regular order in passing budgets and opposed standoffs that could result in a government shutdown. Rep. Raúl Labrador supported not caving during the lead-up to the 2013 shutdown, telling NPR that he would agree to a one-year continuing resolution if the implementation of the Affordable Care Act was delayed for a year.

Neither could be reached for comment Monday, a federal holiday.

Grossenbacher said the constant shutdown warnings have another effect, more subtle than furloughs but more lasting as well. The yearslong reliance on short-term spending bills, and regular standoffs when funding is running out, make planning much more difficult.

“It’s extraordinarily disruptive,” he said. “It’s very hard to do anything long-term. All your thinking and planning has to be short-term, because there’s no guarantee that you’ll have money. Managing by (continuing resolution) ... reduces you to very short-term planning. Most good and important work requires long-term planning.”

The last several near-misses have been resolved with further short-term spending measures, sometimes accompanied by policy concessions.

Democrats reportedly want some solution for those protected by the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program, undocumented immigrants who were brought to the U.S. as small children. Former President Barack Obama created DACA by executive order to protect that subset of undocumented immigrants from deportation. Recent polls show between 70 and 80 percent popular support for allowing the “Dreamers,” as the group is sometimes called, to remain in the country.

There also are reportedly disputes about disaster aid and expired funding for the Children’s Health Insurance Program.

However the policy disputes are resolved, with only four days to come up with a deal to keep the government open, another continuing resolution is the most likely mechanism to extend spending authority. If a shutdown is avoided this time, the same problem is likely arise again soon.

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